

In Loving Memory

William Arthur Newman
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W. A. on the flight line while on TDY in Iceland, May 1955

I have so many fond memories of my father. He was not a saint, he was a lot more interesting than that. He was by turns funny, curmudgeonly, sentimental and bull-headed, but he was unfailingly loyal, dependable, responsible and devoted to us.

My father was blessed with loving parents who encouraged him to excel. After graduating from high school in 1936, with the kind assistance of Mrs. Glenn, County Ordinary, and Mrs. Fulghum, W.A. was accepted at the agricultural college at Rabun Gap, Georgia [this later became a high school, noteworthy for the *Foxfire* books]. His father borrowed someone's Model A to take W.A. to Rabun Gap up in North Georgia, and gave him all the money he had at the time - 50 cents, not a handsome sum but then that amount went a lot further in those days. My grandfather reasoned that my father's need was greater, as he would be living among strangers while my grandfather would return home to family and friends.

W.A. lived and worked at the college over the summer to start paying his tuition for the coming fall term. He remained there for a year, taking as many courses as he was able and financing it with the various jobs to be had at a working agricultural college - in addition to a farm, there was a dairy and a mill. He was small for his age but knew how to drive and often drove the trucks used to haul hay from the fields. He also borrowed some hair clippers from his brother-in-law, Edison Roberts, and learned how to cut hair so he'd have a little spending money.

W.A. went to Abraham Baldwin College in Tifton, Georgia, in about 1938. He convinced them to let him do three quarters' worth of course work in two quarters, since he had neither the time nor the money to linger over the task. He realized that the United States would eventually enter the war in Europe and reasoned that his chances for survival were greater as a pilot than as a foot soldier, so he took flying

lessons in Cochran, Georgia from a female pilot named Hazel Raines.

He was working as a soil cartographer for the Department of Agriculture when he enlisted in the Army Air Corps on 3 Oct 1941. He already had his civilian "wings" and was sent to cadet school in Columbus, Mississippi, graduating from there and entering active service as a 2nd Lieutenant in May 1942. His separation record summarizes his military occupations as follows: "Operated four engine aircraft in Troop Carrier Command towing gliders, transporting personnel, supplies and equipment. Also evacuated the sick and wounded, dropped parachutists behind enemy lines, and dropped food and medical supplies to troops behind enemy lines. Participated in three invasions, Sicily, Italy and North Africa. Had 823 combat hours." He made Captain several months before his separation from service in February 1946.

My father never really expected to survive the war, and considered every day thereafter as a gift to be treasured. He went back to Wilcox County, where he taught farming to returning vets through the County Extension department, worked as a land surveyor and started a lumber mill. He had the greatest respect for the generations of ancestors who had made farming their livelihood, but he didn't like the odds well enough to consider doing the same. By the time he was recalled to active military service in 1953 during the Korean conflict, he was a husband and father of two with a third on the way. He soon decided that a career in the nascent United States Air Force would be a surer way to provide for his family comfortably into the future. By the time I was born in Georgia a few months later, my father was already on assignment at Schilling Air Force Base in Kansas.

My dad spent most of his career as an aircraft commander flying tankers, first the KC-97, then the KC-135 starting in 1961. He served time as Chief of the Standardization Section with the 28th Air Refueling Squadron, winning a commendation medal for his crew's work training and evaluating aircrew proficiency: "He and his crew were given the project of preparing all crews for evaluation by the Strategic Standardization Group. The preparation was so thorough that all six crews evaluated received satisfactory ratings in all phases and became the first unit in Strategic Air Command to achieve this standard."

We were luckier than most military families, in that we didn't move as often. We always remained stateside, and to my parents' way of thinking, much too far from their native Georgia. If you must live in blizzard country, though, it's a better proposition when you're a kid: you don't have to drive in it and really bad weather just means an unexpected school holiday. My dad would save his vacation time so that we could go home to Georgia for several weeks or a month every couple of years, and these road trips figure in some of my fondest memories. We didn't drive a Chevrolet (my dad preferred the power of his 1957 pink Cadillac), but we sure did see the USA: everything from Pike's Peak to the Grand Canyon, Carlsbad Caverns and Devil's Tower, the Petrified Forest and the Badlands. We even got to see the Dead Sea Scrolls at a museum in Omaha, where my dad was attending the University of Nebraska to finish his four-year degree in Business and Economics through the military's Boot Strap program. This was back in the days before franchises, and finding good food on the road could be hit-and-miss at best. My mother convinced my father to buy a Coleman stove, and soon we were eating as well on the road as we ate at home. In 1960, we used the money we'd saved on one trip to go to Disneyland.

We experienced the separations and inconveniences typical for military families, when my dad served TDYs in places like Goose Bay, Labrador, Iceland or England, or the year he spent in Southeast Asia. Between 7-year stints in Kansas and South Dakota, we spent six weeks each in California and New Mexico, which meant I attended the second grade in three different states that year. This was also during the Cold War, when military personnel had to remain on base on alert status for a week at a time on a

rotating basis. But we were always a close-knit family and my father's presence was felt even when he had to be gone. And when he was there, there was adventure and always laughter.

He used to tie our sled to the back of the car and pull us slowly over the ice-covered streets in our Salina neighborhood. While we were in Omaha in the summer of 1965, we went to see a demonstration of the first turbo-engine car. They weren't allowing test drives, but he convinced the dealership to let him take it for a spin: being a jet pilot, he argued, he would be able to offer them an expert opinion on the ride. We went to see *The Greatest Story Ever Told* at a CinemaScope theater while we were staying there. My dad loved electronics and flying and new-fangled gadgets that made life easier or just more interesting. He had a wonderful belly laugh that we never tired of hearing, and a quirky sense of humor that entertained us kids, especially when my mother had to remind him to mind his manners.

He was only 53 when he retired from the Air Force in 1973; my parents went back to the small town in Georgia where he'd grown up, and it wasn't long before he bought a mom-and-pop motel. Then, a couple of years later, he opened up an auto parts store. One of my favorite pictures was taken by a tourist passing through Abbeville, who was surely convinced he had captured the personification of small-town life in the South when he coaxed my dad into posing in front of his store.

When he finally did retire for good, after he and my mother had followed us kids out to California, my father faced probably one of the biggest challenges in his life. He still found things to interest him, but he had worked his entire life and just didn't know how to enjoy all the free time. He remained healthy almost to the end of his life, but we know now that he suffered a number of TIAs some time over these years; as a result, he was more often cross where he had always been easy-going. Some of his frustration came, I think, from being relegated to spectator status in life, because he had always been on the go, in the forefront, making things happen in life the way he thought they should be.

He's been gone now for over 10 years, and I still consider him the finest man I've ever known. Rife with imperfections, just like the rest of us but, at his core, he was perpetually honorable, loyal, generous, willing to admit his mistakes and make amends. He had an innate wisdom and strength of character that serve as beacons for me still. Of all his wonderful qualities, I think I most admired and strive to emulate his sense of fairness, the notion that good deeds should be recognized and that the strong should look after those less able to defend themselves. He expected his kids to live up to our capabilities, but he always praised our sincere efforts rather than fixating on whether or not we actually succeeded. Though he took pride in our accomplishments, he was more interested in what kind of people we became.

There's no question that both my parents contributed equally, though in different ways, to the rearing of their three children. But my father left an indelible mark on us all. He absolutely loved talking about my genealogical research, would strain to recall obscure events and relatives he'd heard tell about when he was growing up, and would take me wherever I wanted to go in search of artifacts. In some ways, my continuing family research is a testament to him, to the sense of family he instilled in me, the lessons he taught and the experiences he enabled. And I knew this book just wouldn't be complete without a special dedication to him.